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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the way in which early childhood educators introduce reading and writing to 4- and 5-year-olds. A random sampling of the 903 public and private preschools registered with the Human Services Department in a midwestern state was conducted. Questionnaires were mailed to 687 randomly selected early childhood educators teaching 4- and 5-year-olds in preschool programs in the Midwest. A total of 296 teachers responded, for a return rate of 43 percent. Findings document that only a small percentage of preschool teachers in the Midwest have implemented activities, displays, or materials that create a literacy-oriented classroom. It is concluded that in order for early childhood education programs to become "print-rich," preschool teachers must be educated about preschoolers' knowledge of written language and the ways in which opportunities to construct and experiment with print enhance young children's literacy development. (RH)

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A Survey of Literacy Programs Among Preschools

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A Survey of Literacy Programs Among Preschools

A number of authors have speculated that reading instruction has become an inherent part of the preschool curriculum. Early childhood educators' concerns about how reading is being presented to preschoolers has been repeatedly noted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1986). Nonetheless, few studies have attempted to describe how written language is introduced to children enrolled in our preschool programs. In a single study, Fuchs (1986) surveyed 26 preschool and daycare centers in Florida. From the findings she reported that early childhood educators appeared to use appropriate prereading activities that included reading to children and talking about pictures. Other authors, however, claim that a very different picture exists in our preschool language programs. Collins (1986), reporting on a study by Rawl and O'Tuel, suggested that the majority of early childhood educators use a formal, structured approach that is likely to include a basal-reader.

Therefore, in response to claims of inappropriate teaching techniques being used to teach reading, two position papers were published to provide guidelines for early childhood educators. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1986) and the International Reading Association (1986) outlined developmentally appropriate practices for teaching reading in programs serving four- and five-year-olds. The statements advocate an "emergent literacy approach" for pre-first grade programs that incorporates meaningful writing experiences in the classroom as an effective way to introduce children to reading. This contemporary view recommends that children be provided "many opportunities to see how reading and writing are useful before they are instructed in letter names, letter sounds, and word identification" (p. 24). A significant component of the emergent literacy approach also advocates that teachers encourage children to experiment with writing by inventing their own spellings. Accordingly, the developmentally appropriate preschool is print-rich with materials, displays, and activities designed to facilitate a natural interaction between written language and children. Whether or not the emergent literacy approach has been implemented in preschools today has not been investigated.

In light of the the paucity of research studies and the conflicting descriptions of preschool language programs it would appear that additional research is needed to learn how reading and writing are implemented in the preschool curriculum. Hence, the purpose of the current study was to examine how early childhood educators introduce four- and five-year-olds to reading and writing.

Method

A random sampling was conducted of the 903 public and private preschools registered with the Human Services Department in a midwestern state. In May of 1989, questionnaires were mailed to 687 randomly selected early childhood educators throughout the state. With a return rate of 43%, the results presented in this study reflect the responses of 296 early childhood educators currently teaching four- and five- year-olds in preschool programs in the Midwest. Respondents completed the survey anonymously. No attempt was made to identify the individuals, their program, or program location. The preschool teachers were simply asked to answer questions as they apply to the practices they used with four- and five-year-olds.

Because more than 20% of the questionnaires were not returned, a portion of the nonresponding group was interviewed to determine if their responses were biased (Borg and Gall, 1983). Fifteen cases were randomly selected and interviewed to obtain the necessary information. Their responses to items were compared to responses of the responding group. No differences were noted between the two groups. Therefore, it is assumed that the responding group generally represents an unbiased sample of early childhood educators from the Midwest. Frequencies were calculated among all the variables investigated. Percentages were rounding to the nearest whole number and were reported when figures exceeded one percent.

Results and Discussion

The majority of early childhood educators in this study represent experienced and educated teachers. That is, 71% had taught preschool for five or more years and 70% had earned at least a bachelor's degree. In addition, a majority of the teachers held special certifications with endorsements in either elementary education (35%) or early childhood education (23%). Although only one percent of the respondents indicated that they had earned

a reading endorsement, 60% reported that they had taken at least two reading courses. Hence, the respondents appeared to represent knowledgeable practitioners of children's reading and writing development.

One of the major purposes of this study was to determine how preschool educators introduce children to reading. Early childhood educators were asked to indicate among four items the statement that best described the approach they used to teach reading. Figure 1 shows that the most frequent response was the emergent literacy approach (62%). That is, a majority of teachers reported that their preschoolers experience many meaningful opportunities to interact with written and oral language in an effort to prepare them for reading. These initial results appear to support the recommendations published by the NAEYC (1986) and the IRA (1986). Nevertheless, the results also indicate that approximately one third of the preschool teachers may use practices that are in sharp contrast to the emergent literacy approach. A notable number of early childhood educators claimed that exposing children to written language is developmentally inappropriate (14%) or that it should be delayed until a child can first demonstrate proficiency in oral language usage (6%). On the other hand, some teachers found opposition with these views and indicated that preschoolers needed direct instruction in prereading skills, such as letter names and letter sounds, to prepare them for reading.

The findings appear to suggest that there exists considerable controversy among practitioners as to how to prepare four- and five-year-olds for reading. Elkind (1986) has suggested that direct teaching of beginning reading skills and other related practices are the result of misconceptions about how young children learn. Therefore, an analysis of the approaches used by only those respondents who have an early childhood education endorsement was conducted. Preschool teachers holding a special endorsement in early childhood education were expected to present a different view of how to prepare preschoolers for reading. Nonetheless, the results were strikingly similar to the approaches selected by all the respondents (N=296). A majority (63%) indicated an emergent literacy approach, while 10% advocated the direct teaching of prereading skills and, still, others (18%) professed that involving children with written language needed to be delayed or avoided altogether. Hence, the controversy regarding reading appears to exist even among teachers who have been educated in the constructive notion

proposed by Piaget; children learn by experimenting and reconstructing written language.

Overall, the results reported thus far would seem to indicate, at least in a majority of preschools, that children are introduced to reading by experiencing many opportunities to interact with both printed and oral language. However, a finer review of teachers' other responses revealed that preschoolers are unlikely to experience frequent exposure to meaningful writing activities. Figure 2 illustrates that half of the respondents reported that their children spent 15 minutes or less each week in writing activities and an additional 13% reported that writing experiences were not a part of the preschool program. Such findings were surprising and suggest that the emergent literacy approach implemented in many preschools may not involve adequate opportunities to experiment with written language. A number of proponents of the approach have advocated that children need many meaningful opportunities to interact with writing each day (e.g., Strickland & Morrow, 1988). Nonetheless, this limited exposure to writing activities was not restricted to quantity but was also found in the types of writing experiences provided to preschoolers.

The writing activities presented in Figure 3 illustrates the role that preschool teachers play in exposing children to writing experiences. The findings suggest that few preschool teachers involve children in activities that are likely to promote an understanding of written language. That is, less than one third of the teachers reported that they encouraged children to explore written language by experimenting and inventing their own spellings. A quarter of the respondents indicated that preschoolers write only to practice proper letter formation. An additional 35% indicated that their preschoolers could write but that they did not encourage writing through any planned activities or centers in the classroom. Thus, although a majority of preschool teachers appear to advocate an emergent literacy approach most teachers are not preparing activities that encourage meaningful writing experiences for children.

It seems that teachers may have a mind set that preschoolers are not ready to write. Only carefully controlled writing activities were found in most preschool programs, such as writing names on their work (82%) and copying and tracing letters (60%). Writing activities that encourage children to construct their own spellings are likely to be absent from most preschool

programs (e.g., 20% report children write labels and 9% report children write messages).

A similar trend was also noted in the types of displays and materials that children have free access to each day in the preschool. The most frequently found displays of print were those prepared by teachers. In addition, very little print was actually found to be displayed in the classrooms and this tended to include the calendar (87%), the alphabet (76%), and the names of children selected to be helpers (71%). Displays inclined to promote print awareness among young children were simply not found to be prevalent among preschool programs. That is, among the preschool respondents only 27% reported that furniture was labeled and only 26% indicated that written signs for children were displayed in the classrooms.

Preschool educators were also asked to identify the materials that children have free access to each day in the preschools. The respondents did indicate that most children have many opportunities to use a variety of materials associated with written language. The early childhood educators reported that most children experience frequent use of library books (98%), paper for drawing (98%), pencils (93%), markers (90%), and paper for writing (86%). Nonetheless, authors advocating the literacy approach (e.g., Stewart, 1985) suggest that teachers encourage children to interact with print by providing them free access to materials that will entice the most reluctant of writers (e.g., typewriters, a variety of writing instruments and even computers). Among the preschool respondents only 22% reported access to typewriters, 38% indicated access to pens, and 5% reported access to computers. Hence, again, preschool teachers attempts to create a print-rich environment by incorporating unconventional materials in the classroom has generally not been widely demonstrated.

An inquiry of the preschool teachers attempts to provide direct instruction in the concepts and skills relating to beginning reading was also examined. From the results it appears that most preschool children receive direct instruction in reading their own names (92%), writing their own names (84%), sounding out words (83%), and recognizing the names of the letters (72%). Such evidence would appear to suggest that the language program in most preschools incorporates several teacher-directed activities.

Although most claim to support the emergent literacy approach, attempts to incorporate written language in the preschool program seem rare.

This is particularly surprising because 76% of the respondents had indicated that they believed writing should have a positive impact on children's ability to learn to read. It should, however, be noted that preschool teachers place a much greater value on reading to children rather than having children write. All 296 respondents reported that they believed that reading to preschoolers would have a positive impact on children's subsequent reading achievement and 92 % reported that they read to children at least once a day. These comparison reveal an uncertainty among preschool teachers about the value of having four- and five-year-olds experiment with written language.

In conclusion, the survey results repeatedly document that only a small percentage of preschool teachers in the Midwest have implemented activities, displays, or materials to create a literacy-oriented classroom. Perhaps this reluctance is due in part to early childhood educators noted concern about creating an unsuited academic environment for young children. Indeed, in an open-ended question, 80% of the preschool respondents expressed concern about preschoolers being expected to write. The current findings seem to indicate that preschools use conventional methodology in exposing children to reading and writing. Accordingly, today's preschoolers are likely to be read to, to learn the names of letters, and to read and write their own names. However, the experiences associated with the emergent literacy approach have generally not been well implemented. In order for early childhood education programs to become print-rich, preschool teachers must be educated about preschoolers' knowledge of written language and how opportunities to construct and experiment with print can enhance young children's literacy development.

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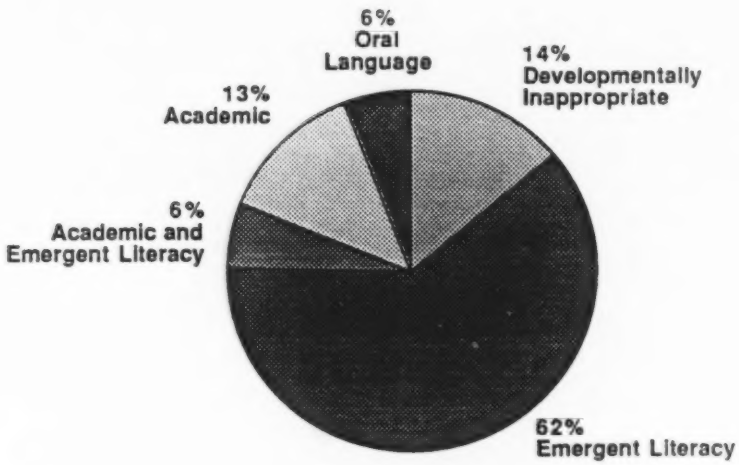

Figure 1. Early Educators' Approach to Reading (N=296)

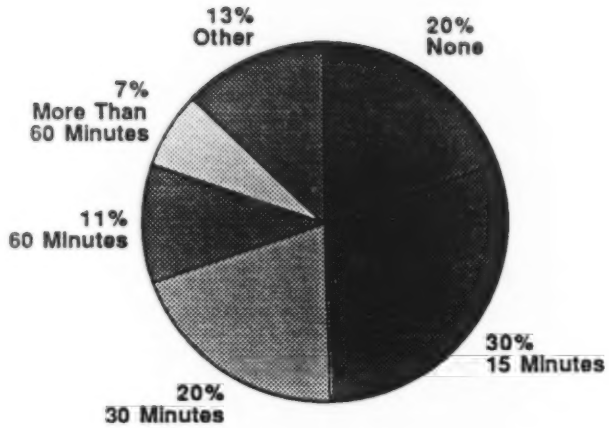

Figure 2. Amount of Time Preschoolers Write Weekly (N=296)

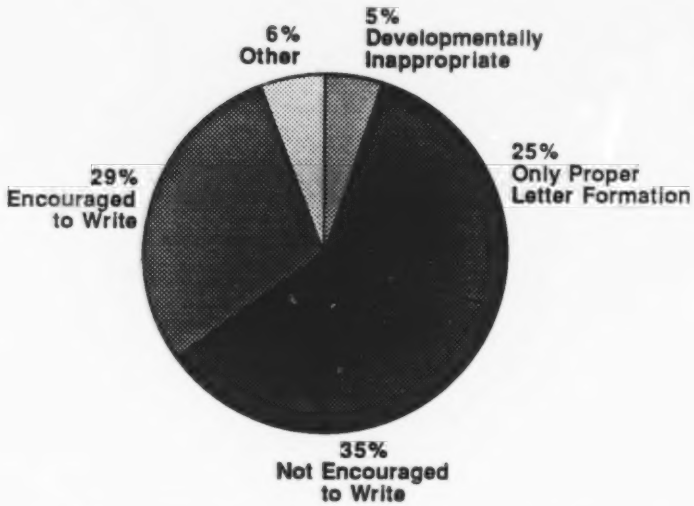

Figure 3. Writing Experiences of Preschoolers
(N=296)

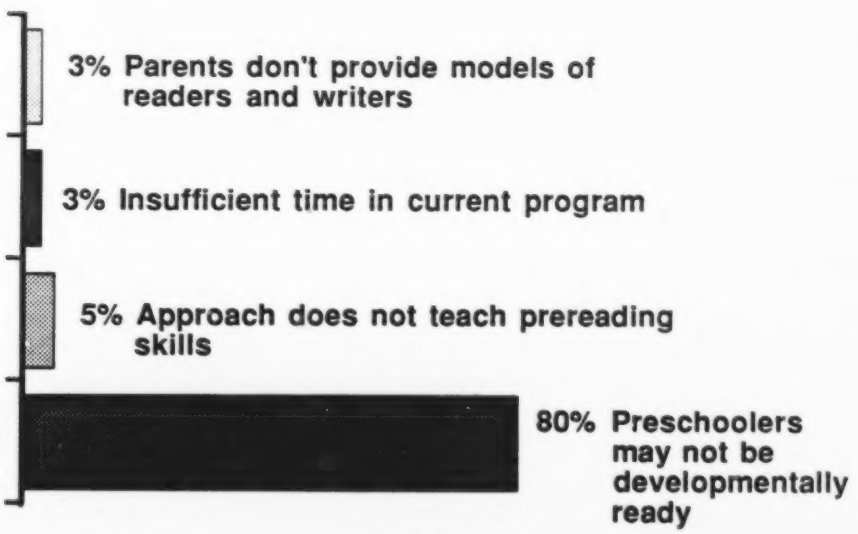
3% Parents don't provide models of readers and writers
3% Insufficient time in current program
5% Approach does not teach prereading skills
80% Preschoolers may not be developmentally ready

Figure 4. Teachers' Concerns About Encouraging Preschoolers to Write
(N=296)